

# How does the church handle conflict in its midst and what challenges does it face in handling conflict constructively?

A bibliographic review article by Alastair McKay,  
Executive Director of Bridge Builders

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## **Introduction**

Primarily through a review of the existing available literature, in this essay I seek to explore how conflict – which I view as normal and inevitable – is handled in church life and what challenges need to be faced if conflict is to be handled constructively and creatively. I begin by identifying what I mean by conflict, and why it tends to be viewed negatively, and how we can describe different levels of conflict intensity. Then I explore some of the negative attitudes and patterns that contribute to conflict being poorly dealt with in the church, as well as factors that are particular to church conflict, before articulating the need for a change in the culture of how conflict is handled, if we are to be able to make church conflicts Christian.<sup>2</sup> I point to a few of the practicalities involved in such a change in culture. Then I go on to review what insights are offered by existing research that has been carried out into church conflict. This research sheds light on some of the sources of church conflict, into a distinction between within-frame and between-frame conflicts, and into the relationship between conflict and changes in church life. Finally I conclude by briefly affirming the significance of the church in God's purposes for the world, and thus the importance of how the church lives out its witness, before pointing to a possible area for further research.

## **How we understand “conflict”: moving towards a transformational approach**

Conflict is normal in the church, and all churches have to deal with conflict. A national survey of over 14,000 congregations in the USA in the year 2000 found that 75% of those congregations had faced some level of what they could clearly identify as conflict in the five years prior to the survey.<sup>3</sup> Although there are no comparable figures for congregations in the UK, on the basis of my experience I would expect the results to be similar.<sup>4</sup> So a key question and challenge for our churches is: How do British churches go about dealing with the inevitable conflict that they face, and how can they do so in a more constructive manner?

One of the difficulties in talking about conflict in the church is with our understanding of the word “conflict”. In contemporary conflict studies, “conflict” is generally defined in broader and more generic terms than the common use of the term in the news media, where the word is generally used to designate violent conflict. One definition commonly cited, at least in relation to interpersonal conflict, is that offered by Wilmot and Hocker:

Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.<sup>5</sup> This definition points to certain key elements in an understanding of conflict: that it becomes conflict once it is expressed in some way, moving beyond something latent; that it generally involves people who are in some kind of interdependency, which is certainly appropriate when

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly revised version of an essay submitted in February 2009 towards a Doctorate of Ministry degree, Spurgeon's College, London.

<sup>2</sup> I have borrowed this last phrase from Hugh Halverstadt. Halverstadt, H. *Managing Church Conflict* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) 4

<sup>3</sup> Dudley, C., Zingery, T., and Breeden, D. *Insights into Congregational Conflict* (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today, Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2007)

<sup>4</sup> I have worked as an educator and consultant on church conflict since 1996, and full time since 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Wilmot, W. and Hocker, J. *Interpersonal Conflict* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2001, sixth edition) 41.

reflecting on the congregational context; and that people's perceptions – and by implication their misperceptions – are central to the experience of conflict. This definition is less user-friendly than the simple definition I often use in my training work: "Conflict equals differences plus tension."<sup>6</sup> Most people recognise that there will inevitably be differences within any group of people. Some of these will be differences which no one is worried about, but there will be other differences which lead to tension within the group. When we are dealing with that tension, then we are dealing with conflict, as I am using the word. This broader use of the term means that much more is included in what is designated as "conflict" than might typically be the case. Such a definition also helps open up the possibility of embracing and positively engaging with the experience of conflict. However, it is important to recognise that the majority of people use the term conflict to refer to something which is seen as destructive and negative.<sup>7</sup> For most people it represents a change to see conflict as something potentially constructive which offers an opportunity for growth and positive change.

In trying to shift perceptions, it is worth reflecting on why conflict is normally perceived so negatively. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk suggests four common misperceptions of conflict.<sup>8</sup> First, we often restrict the use of the term conflict to tensions where there are negative elements, and fail to include situations where there is a positive or constructive outcome. Second, we tend to view pain and struggle as negative and as experiences to be avoided, rather than as inescapable and intrinsic elements in growth and creativity – and, for the Christian, in discipleship. Third, as Christians, we often hold a theology (whether implicit or explicit) that conflict is wrong or sinful, instead of understanding that conflict is neutral and that it is our responses to conflict which may be sinful or godly.<sup>9</sup> Finally, we like to think that it should be easy to get along together, but in reality, dealing creatively with our differences in Christian community is often profoundly challenging and demanding:

We have seldom been taught how to be proactive in conflict and to understand that conflict transformation is a deeply spiritual task that demands commitment, discipline, new skills, much practice, and constant vigilance from each of us.<sup>10</sup>

So a central issue is the question of how we think about conflict. John Paul Lederach offers the challenge to think about conflict in terms of *conflict transformation* (rather than the more common "conflict resolution" or "conflict management"):

A transformational approach recognizes that conflict is a normal and continuous dynamic within human relationships. Moreover, conflict brings with it the potential for constructive change. Positive change does not always happen, of course. As we all know too well, many times conflict results in long-standing cycles of hurt and destruction. But the key to transformation is a proactive bias toward seeing conflict as a potential catalyst for growth.<sup>11</sup>

Like Lederach, I do not want to pretend that conflict is always positive. Patently this is not the case. At heightened levels of tension, conflict can be particularly destructive. However, it is interesting to note that one American survey of pastors' experience of conflict indicated that over 90% of pastors recognised that conflict can have positive outcomes. They specifically cited

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<sup>6</sup> Schrock-Shenk, C. Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation in Schrock-Shenk, C. and Ressler, L. (eds.) *Making Peace with Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999) 23.

<sup>7</sup> Tjosvold, D. "Defining conflict and making choices about its management: Lighting the dark side of organizational life", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 2006, Volume: 17, Issue: 2, 87-95

<sup>8</sup> Schrock-Shenk, C. *op. cit.*, 33-34

<sup>9</sup> Conflict is like power in this respect (and the two are intrinsically inter-connected). Power may be positive or negative, holy or sinful, depending on how it is used.

<sup>10</sup> Schrock-Shenk, C. *op. cit.*, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Lederach, J. P. *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003) 15

benefits that included greater wisdom, a better-defined vision for the church, better communication with the congregation, and stronger relationships.<sup>12</sup>

### **Assessing conflict intensity**

Conflict becomes more destructive as it increases in intensity, and Speed Leas has provided a framework for naming and identifying the different levels of intensity of conflict in a group.<sup>13</sup> Leas proposes five broad levels of conflict intensity (along with strategies for working with each level, which I shall not cover here in detail). These might be pictured as steps on a staircase, which he designates thus:

*Level 1: Problems to Solve.* At this level there are real differences between people, but the people are problem-focused not person-focused. Communication is clear and specific and the people involved want to sort out the problem. This is a normal and entirely healthy level of conflict.

*Level 2: Disagreement.* At this level people are more concerned with self-protection than problem-solving and may talk mainly with friends about how to deal with an issue. Communication is more generalised and people withhold information they think may be used by those with whom they disagree. Again, it is normal for most churches to experience this level of conflict.

*Level 3: Contest.* At this level people's objectives shift to winning the argument and coming out on top. There is a win-lose dynamic and communication becomes more distorted with personal attacks and emotional arguments overshadowing rational argument. It is not unusual for churches to experience this level of conflict – and this is the first level where people may name the dynamic as one of “conflict”, as negative elements become more evident.

*Level 4: Fight or Flight.* At this level the parties' goal is to hurt or get rid of others, or to leave if they cannot achieve this. Factions have solidified, with identified leaders, and the good of the subgroup, rather than the whole congregation or wider Christian body, becomes their focus. Communication is characterised by blaming, negative stereotyping, self-righteousness and a refusal to take responsibility. It is less common for churches to reach this level of conflict, and once they do so they generally feel stuck, and normally need outside help if the group is to stay together.

*Level 5: Intractable.* In a church context, this level is perhaps better referred to as “Holy War” since the conflict is out of the participants' control, and the goal of opposing parties is to destroy one another. In such situations people see themselves as part of an eternal cause, fighting for universal principles with any means justifying the all-important ends. Communication is characterised by outright condemnation of others, extreme emotional volatility, compulsiveness, an inability to disengage, and with the issues lost from sight. This is conflict at its most destructive, and requires separation of the warring parties, some kind of peacekeeping rather than a peacemaking initiative.

By identifying these levels of conflict, Leas helps us to understand some of the complexity that can be involved in working with conflict in the church. Whether we are in the midst of the situation or we are involved in intervening in the conflict, an accurate assessment of the level of intensity is critical. “If you do not recognise the conflict level then it is likely that what you do will at best be ineffective and at worst be counter-productive. Misjudging the conflict level can do more harm than good.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A survey conducted by Christianity Today in 2004: 999 surveys were mailed and 506 were returned, for a response rate of 51 percent. Results reported in an article: LaRue, J. C. “Church Conflict” available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/yc/2006/001/9.80.html> [Accessed 26 December 2008]

<sup>13</sup> Leas, S. *Moving Your Church Through Conflict* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1985), esp. 17-22.

<sup>14</sup> Boyd-Macmillan, E. and Savage, S. *Transforming Conflict: Conflict Transformation Amongst Senior Church Leaders With Different Theological Stances* (York: Foundation for Church Leadership, 2008) 76

## Acknowledging the culture of “niceness” and other cultural problems in the church

However, in most cases the challenge for our churches is not how to sort out a conflict once it has escalated to a high level, but how to deal with our everyday conflicts so that they do not end up escalating to such a point. A central problem in dealing with conflict within most of our churches is the prevailing culture of conflict avoidance and ‘niceness’. It is common for people in churches to live by the unwritten rule that: “Thou shalt be nice. Always be nice.”<sup>15</sup> This needs to be not just recognised but directly addressed. As one writer urges us: “Challenge, expose and discard the norm of ‘niceness’ that rejects conflict as ‘non-Christian’.”<sup>16</sup>

One item of British congregational research is of related interest here. Matthew Guest suggests that conflict avoidance can be used as a deliberate strategy to try and maintain unity and harmony in churches where there is significant diversity.<sup>17</sup> Focussing his analysis on the public preaching at St Michael-le-Belfrey in York, he concludes that this church “is held together by a discourse which accommodates its various schools of belief while also controlling public utterance so that conflict is avoided.”<sup>18</sup> He sees this being achieved by, for example, the extensive teaching on the reformed Christian life being kept vague and imprecise, and by avoiding teaching on moral issues or offering “specific moral prescriptions or sanctions.”<sup>19</sup> This has allowed the congregation to successfully encompass “both liberal (open, broad and tolerant) and conservative (narrow, exclusivist) camps, holding each in a deliberate balance, while attempting to compromise neither.”<sup>20</sup> However, while there are times when it is appropriate to avoid conflict, as the church’s primary or sole strategy conflict avoidance will likely lead to a build up of tensions that can explode destructively at a later stage. Conflict avoidance also misses out on more creative options for dealing with the tensions and differences within the Christian congregation.

As well as a pervasive culture of conflict avoidance, when tensions are addressed there are often unhelpful patterns in the ways that people respond in churches (although these patterns are probably not restricted to the church). Speed Leas highlights some of these patterns: “dropping out” by not attending services or stopping financial giving; blaming other individuals or groups, who have a differing or opposing view to our own; attacking others, by questioning their character and motivation, or by starting a campaign or petition; and generalising, by moving away from specific matters to sweeping assessments and evaluations of others.<sup>21</sup> Ron Kraybill identifies a wider range of patterns including the following: leaders discouraging expression of disagreement and urging harmony; viewing conflict as wrong, disloyal and something to be avoided at all costs; spiritualising conflict and confusing personal views with God’s will; blurring issues and people; communicating only indirectly, for example with friends, and refusing to address issues directly with others; hoarding up hurts from the past; reacting negatively to others’ views, rather than responding thoughtfully; focussing on positions and solutions, rather than clarifying process and exploring underlying concerns; and not tolerating uncertainty.<sup>22</sup>

A recent Bridge Builders’ Network Day with 17 church leaders from six different denominations working together identified further unhelpful patterns in church life that contribute

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<sup>15</sup> Lederach, J. P. *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999) 101

<sup>16</sup> Boyd-Macmillan, E. and Savage, S. *op. cit.*, 95

<sup>17</sup> Guest, M. “‘Friendship, Fellowship and Acceptance’: The Public Discourse of a Thriving Evangelical Congregation” in Guest, M., Tusting, K., and Woodhead, L. *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) 71-84

<sup>18</sup> Guest, M. *op. cit.*, 77

<sup>19</sup> Guest, M. *op. cit.*, 78-79

<sup>20</sup> Guest, M. *op. cit.*, 81

<sup>21</sup> Leas, S. *The Basics of Conflict Management in Congregations* in Lott, D. B. (ed.) *Conflict Management in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001) 25-30

<sup>22</sup> Kraybill, R. *Habits in Conflict: Divided by Versus Bound Together by Conflict* in Schrock-Shenk, C. (ed.) *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual: Foundations and Skills for Constructive Conflict Transformation* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Conciliation Service, 2000<sup>4</sup>)



to unhelpful ways of handling conflict: people acquiescing to the dominant voice of key “gate keepers,” or of historically dominant families; older people (who can be in a majority in some of the older established churches) resisting change, or at least having difficulty accepting change; people wanting the church to be a refuge from conflict, because they have to deal with so much conflict elsewhere in their lives; painful baggage from the past over-shadowing present interactions; having structures which do not encourage tensions and concerns to surface until a decision is needed, and having a lack of suitable informal processes to explore potentially conflictual issues prior to them being raised on formal meeting agendas; and a general defensiveness in people’s approach, rooted in concerns about the church’s survival, due to declining numbers.<sup>23</sup>

### **Particular challenges of conflict in the church context**

While only a few of the above range of negative patterns may be restricted to churches, we need to recognise that there are some particular challenges in engaging with conflict in a church setting which do seem to be specific to that context. Hugh Halverstadt points to three of these.<sup>24</sup>

First, people’s identities are at stake in church conflicts: “Spiritual commitments and faith understandings are highly inflammable because they are central to one’s psychological identity.”

Second, the Christian gospel itself is intrinsically volatile, and involved in the business of effecting social and personal change.

Third, churches are voluntary institutions “whose structures and processes permit and even entice unaccountable uses of power.” I think this last is especially a potential problem in a community, such as the church, where the broken and needy are welcomed in, and where they may have little opportunity to exercise power and influence elsewhere in their lives.

These are not the only challenges, however. As I have written elsewhere, there are several other factors which contribute to complex emotional dynamics and a potentially high level of intensity in engaging with conflict in the church, including the following:

1) Christian communities function like an extended family, with close personal relationships and struggles over relating to the parental figures in the church;

2) The community life of the church has the potential to take on greater significance for those involved in that community, because of the breakdown of other social structures in our society, including the family;

3) Church members often hold unrealistic and idealised expectations of those in ordained ministry;

4) There can be a lack of maturity and personal self-awareness among some of those serving in ordained ministry, which affects their leadership and how they handle conflict;

5) There is often a lack of clarity and good process in church decision-making; and, as we have already noted,

6) There is a prevailing tendency of Christians to avoid or spiritualise conflict.<sup>25</sup>

Some similar points to the above are made by another church consultant, Darrell Puls, who puts the complexities of church conflict down to a combination of the family-like dynamics of the church combined with it being a large-scale volunteer organisation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Bridge Builders, “Current features of the church’s life that contribute to *unhelpful* ways of handling differences, tension and conflict” Unpublished notes from the Bridge Builders’ Network Day in London held on 22 January 2009 at the London Mennonite Centre

<sup>24</sup> Halverstadt, H. *op. cit.*, 2. The following two short quotes are from this page.

<sup>25</sup> McKay, A. J. M. “What is Distinctive About Church Conflict?” Available at <http://www.bbministries.org.uk/articles/> [Accessed 26 September 2011]

<sup>26</sup> See Puls, D. “Mastering the Storm of Church Conflict” available at <http://www.churchhealers.com/Church%20Conflict.htm> [Accessed 26 December 2008]. Puls highlights how this combination can lead to a clash of largely unexpressed interests and expectations.

Linked to these challenges is the tendency for Christian communities to want to hold on to a fantasy, or what Bonhoeffer calls a “wishful image,” of what church life is like.<sup>27</sup> If we are to experience genuine Christian community, Bonhoeffer believes that there is a need to experience and face into a “great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves.”<sup>28</sup> Scott Peck expresses a similar view in his exploration of community, where he sees the need for a community to travel through stages of chaos and emptiness in the journey from pseudo-community, where we are simply being nice to one another, to true community, where we can be real with one another.<sup>29</sup>

### **Making conflicts Christian, and building a culture of peace in the church**

In seeking to find a path through the above challenges, Halverstadt points to the importance of how Christians engage with one another: “the key to making church conflicts Christian may be found in fashioning a faith-based process for differing parties to use. *How* Christians behave in conflicts is of critical and spiritual consequence for *what* they seek.”<sup>30</sup> As Halverstadt suggests in his book, and as others such as Eolene Boyd-Macmillan have perhaps articulated more clearly, this is going to involve a change in culture for most churches:

Only a comprehensive revamping of how we think about ourselves and others in conflict, both as individuals and groups, along with shifts in our church cultures will “transform” conflict. The goal is not to get all Christians to agree on everything, but to stop the name-calling, the blaming, the talking past one another, the hatred and spiritual skewering of one another. Our vision is to learn to disagree, perhaps even on matters of truth, in ways that embody the gospel of Truth and set an example for other communities.<sup>31</sup>

Alan Kreider articulates this change as the need to build a “culture of peace” in the church, grounded in the biblical vision of *shalom*, which will be a “distinctive cultural identity growing out of our life in fellowship with Jesus Christ.”<sup>32</sup> Kreider’s view, from might be seen as a liberal evangelical perspective, is shared by some at a more markedly conservative end of the church spectrum. Presbyterian pastor, and chairman of the board of Peacemaker Ministries, Alfred Poirier asserts that “... we tend to assume that peacemaking is meant to be merely corrective and not something constructive. Yet the ministry of reconciliation that God gives us is chiefly to build Christ’s people to be peacemakers and his church to be a culture of peace.”<sup>33</sup>

Kreider looks at the practicalities of developing this culture of peace, and suggests the need for four key *attitudes* and four central *skills*. These are attitudes of vulnerability, humility, commitment to the safety of others, and of hope; and skills of truthful speaking, attentive listening, alertness to community, and community discernment with mutual accountability.<sup>34</sup> These attitudes and skills need to be linked to a basic level of self-awareness. In one of the earliest British books on church conflict, Pauline Bell and Pauline Jordan affirm that, for conflict to be engaged with creatively, “there needs to be a certain amount of self-awareness that enables us to recognise our own motives, needs and values, as well as to help others to recognise and give expression to

<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer, D. *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996) 35

<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer, D. *op. cit.*, 35

<sup>29</sup> Peck, M. S. *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 86-106

<sup>30</sup> Halverstadt, H. *op. cit.*, 4

<sup>31</sup> Boyd-Macmillan, E. and Savage, S. *op. cit.*, 29

<sup>32</sup> Kreider, A., Kreider, E. and Widjaja, P. *A Culture of Peace: God’s Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005) 58

<sup>33</sup> Poirier, A. J. *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books) 14

<sup>34</sup> Kreider, A., Kreider, E. and Widjaja, P. *op. cit.*, 76-91

theirs.”<sup>35</sup> Alan Kreider also reminds us that there is no quick fix, and in seeking to change the way conflict is handled in the church, it is important to acknowledge that:

It will not be easy, and the changes required will be numerous. They will take time – because essentially we are looking at a process of cultural change within the church. And such a change of culture can only take place over the medium- to long-term, through a range of strategies sustained over time.<sup>36</sup>

Much of the work trying to effect a change in culture has been focussed on training individual leaders. This has been the thrust of Bridge Builders’ ministry since its foundation thirteen years ago, and was the focus of a chapter I wrote in 2006 which was published in 2008.<sup>37</sup> There I set out eighteen “keys” for church leaders to transform the way they engage with conflict in the church, as part of creating a culture of peace. This continues to be the focus of attention, as illustrated by Boyd-Macmillan and Savage’s recent work with a disparate group of senior leaders.<sup>38</sup> What needs greater attention is how to develop this culture more widely within the congregation, and within broader church structures.<sup>39</sup>

### **Insights from research on congregational conflict**

So what does the research on congregational conflict tell us that might inform our exploration? Writing in 1993, Penny Becker et al. noted that “the literature that examines congregational conflict is small,”<sup>40</sup> and they observed that “many questions about the nature and processes of conflict in congregations remain unanswered.”<sup>41</sup> Based on my literature searches, I do not think that the situation has changed dramatically since then, although there have been some helpful additions to the research literature.

### **Identifying sources of conflict in congregations**

Attempts have been made to try to identify the sources of conflict in congregations. A senior consultant with the Alban Institute, Roy Pneumann identified nine “predictable sources of conflict” in the congregations with which he consulted:

- 1) members disagree about values and beliefs;
- 2) the congregation’s structure is unclear;
- 3) the pastor’s role and responsibilities are in conflict;
- 4) the structure no longer fits the congregation’s size;
- 5) the clergy and lay leadership styles do not match;
- 6) the new pastor rushes into changes;
- 7) communication lines are blocked;
- 8) church members manage conflict poorly; and
- 9) disaffected members hold back participation and pledges.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Bell, P. and Jordon, P. *Conflict: Handling Conflict in the Local Church* (London: Scripture Union, 1992) 149

<sup>36</sup> Kreider, A., Kreider, E. and Widjaja, P. *op. cit.*, 91

<sup>37</sup> McKay, A. J. M. Resolving Conflict in Nelson, J. (ed.) *How to Become a Creative Church Leader: A Modern Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008) 194-210 (Note that I called the chapter “Transforming Conflict” but this was changed by the publisher, without reference to either the author or the editor.)

<sup>38</sup> Boyd-Macmillan, E. and Savage, S. *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> The only organisational initiative in this area that I am aware of is Peacemaker Ministries’ training package “The Peacemaking Church”. For further information see [http://www.peacemaker.net/site/c.aqKFLTOBIpH/b.2837365/k.65C1/The\\_Peacemaking\\_Church.htm](http://www.peacemaker.net/site/c.aqKFLTOBIpH/b.2837365/k.65C1/The_Peacemaking_Church.htm) [Accessed 7 February 2009]

<sup>40</sup> Becker, P. E., Ellingson, S. J. et al. “Straining at the Tie That Binds: Congregational Conflict in the 1980s”, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol 34, No 3 (March, 1993) 195

<sup>41</sup> Becker, P. E., Ellingson, S. J. et al. *op. cit.*, 193

<sup>42</sup> Pneuman, R. W. Nine Common Sources of Conflict in Churches in Lott, D. B. (ed.) *Conflict Management in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001) 45-53



The Mennonite church consultant David Brubaker notes that Pneumann's proposed sources of conflict can be grouped into three areas:

- organisational *structure* (items 2, 3 and 4),
- matters of church *culture* or practice (items 5, 7 and 8), and
- factors involving *leadership and membership* (items 1, 6 and 9).

Brubaker points out that, "Congregational members may indeed be engaged in what they experience as worship wars or power struggles, but these are nested in particular structural, cultural, and environmental contexts."<sup>43</sup>

Pneumann's identification of sources of conflict seems to be based on his experience from his years of church consulting. A more solidly research-based assessment is offered by Penny Becker et al.<sup>44</sup> They began by identifying four causes of congregational conflict cited in earlier literature on intra-church conflict: disputes along the liberal/conservative divide; external pressures giving rise to internal conflict by triggering latent fissures; conflict self-consciously generated by central or denominational authorities for their own ends; and disputes having their root in differences between clergy and laity. However, in exploring the experience of conflict of a group of 17 congregations from a single urban neighbourhood, the authors concluded that none of the four causes of conflict suggested in earlier research helped to account for the conflict in the churches they interviewed. Instead the authors identified three broad domains for conflict, namely:

- (a) theology, doctrine, or other ideal issues (which they saw as cultural issues);
- (b) resources, such as money, personnel or physical plant (seen as economic issues); and
- (c) church authority (seen as political or administrative issues).<sup>45</sup>

On the specific substance of the conflicts, what was most striking to them was the diversity of the presenting issues.<sup>46</sup> The researchers coded the churches into three broad categories, of liberal, mainstream or conservative, and according to three broad polities, of episcopal, mixed and congregational. These codings offered no conclusive findings, although they noted that conservative churches reported fewer conflicts than moderate and liberal ones, and that episcopal churches reported fewer conflicts than those with congregational or mixed polities. They were, however, struck by the frequent mention by interviewees of local church and community history as setting the ground for contemporary conflict. In other words, most could trace some roots of recent conflict in the congregation to that community's past: conflicts are, inevitably, embedded in an historical context, and are not simply isolated events.

### **Distinguishing between within-frame and between-frame conflict or interest-based and identity-based conflict**

Becker subsequently went on to conduct extensive research with a group of 23 congregations in three adjacent urban districts of greater Chicago, on the patterns of conflict in their churches.<sup>47</sup> In my view, her research ends up having relatively little to say about the functioning of conflict in churches, and her most significant insight is to propose a typology for four different models of church life, that she calls House of Worship, Family, Community and Leader. Each of these models of church offers different answers to the two key cultural questions of "who we are" and "how we do things around here," with differences, for example, in the nature of community life and corporate witness.<sup>48</sup> In my view, her most helpful conflict-specific insight relates to clarifying

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<sup>43</sup> Brubaker, D. R. *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, [2009] forthcoming)

<sup>44</sup> Becker, P. E., Ellingson, S. J. et al. *op. cit.*, 194-195

<sup>45</sup> Becker, P. E., Ellingson, S. J. et al. *op. cit.*, 198

<sup>46</sup> Becker, P. E., Ellingson, S. J. et al. *op. cit.*, 200

<sup>47</sup> Becker, P. E. *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

<sup>48</sup> Becker, P. E. *op. cit.*, 12-17

two different types of conflict. She identifies a crucial distinction, drawing on a study of divorce in the USA, between “*within-frame* conflict” and “*between-frame* conflict”.<sup>49</sup> Within-frame conflicts result from a violation of shared expectations, whereas between-frame conflicts result from the clash of two fundamentally different sets of expectations for behaviour. Within-frame conflicts “can be resolved by routine kinds of processes that enforce compliance with agreed-upon expectations.”<sup>50</sup> The means they are relatively straightforward to deal with. On the other hand, between-frame conflicts are “more difficult to resolve because the divergent expectations include different ideas about appropriate decision-making processes.” She goes on to propose that “between-frame conflicts in small groups are often fundamentally about identity, an attempt to forge an answer to the questions, ‘Who are we?’ and ‘How do we do things around here?’” – generally where there is an attempt to provide a new or different answer to these questions from what has previously been established in the congregation.<sup>51</sup>

Becker’s distinction between these two types of conflict is echoed in recent writings on international conflict. Jay Rothman and Marie Olson note that “it is clear that identity as an analytic tool and focus of global peacemaking continues to grow.”<sup>52</sup> They also speak of the distinction between within-frame and between-frame conflicts, but they prefer the terms “interest-based conflicts” and “identity-based conflicts.” The principal features of interest-based conflicts are that: “Issues are concrete and clearly defined. Desired outcomes are defined in terms of tangible interests and resources. [They] involve relatively agreed upon interpretations of the sources of the conflict and conditions for settlement.” In contrast the features of identity-based conflicts are that: “Issues are abstract, complex, and difficult to define. Desired outcomes are intangible and difficult to identify. [They] involve interpretive dynamics of history, psychology, culture, values, and beliefs of groups that are often, at least initially, framed in ways that are mutually exclusive.”<sup>53</sup> The authors point out that “What is apparent is that interest-based disputes are by definition amenable to traditional forms of negotiation. Identity-based conflicts, on the other hand, contain primary elements that are non-negotiable.”<sup>54</sup> As Rothman’s work indicates, this does not mean that identity-based conflicts cannot be worked with and transformed; however, what he demonstrates is that a distinctly different process of engagement is needed instead of the traditional interest-based and problem-solving approaches promoted by conventional conflict resolution.

Both these separate pieces of work help to illuminate one of the reasons that some church-based conflicts can be so difficult to work with: because they are not simply interest-based conflicts, but identity-based conflicts.

### **The relationship between change and conflict**

A common view of conflict in congregations is that it is directly related to, and a typical response to change in the life of the church. This often crops up in my training work with church leaders: I frequently hear the view that there is conflict in the church because of people’s difficulties in handling change. David Brubaker’s recent research, in a quantitative study with 100 congregations, has helpfully put this thesis to the test, at least in a North American context.<sup>55</sup> Brubaker demonstrates that in fact most change does not correlate strongly with conflict. For example, it is commonly held that undertaking new building work will likely lead to conflict in the

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<sup>49</sup> Becker, P. E. *op. cit.*, 4

<sup>50</sup> Becker, P. E. *op. cit.*, 4

<sup>51</sup> Becker, P. E. *op. cit.*, 4

<sup>52</sup> Rothman, J. and Olson, M. L. “From Interests to Identities: Towards a New Emphasis in Interactive Conflict Resolution” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2001, 289–305 available at [http://www.centerforconciliation.org/PDF/Rothman\\_Olson.pdf](http://www.centerforconciliation.org/PDF/Rothman_Olson.pdf) [Accessed 22 December 2008]

<sup>53</sup> Rothman, J. and Olson, M. L. *op. cit.*, 297

<sup>54</sup> Rothman, J. and Olson, M. L. *op. cit.*, 297

<sup>55</sup> Brubaker, D. R. *op. cit.*,

congregation, but Brubaker's research does not support this. Other changes, such as expanding ministry in the local community or changing the congregation's fellowship patterns, correlated more with growth than with conflict. However, Brubaker found that two types of change do correlate strongly with conflict: changes to the congregation's decision-making structure, and the addition or removal of a Sunday worship service. He suggests that a possible reason that changing the decision-making structure will lead to conflict is because of "the power-mediating and ceremonial role of that structure."<sup>56</sup> While adding or removing a worship service will likely be conflictual because it will disrupt the primary expression of the ritual and cultural life of the group, and may also reflect a clash of worldviews within the congregation. Brubaker reaches the following conclusions from his research:

Despite ... significant limitations, this research offered or reinforced three significant claims. First, change and conflict are pervasive in religious congregations, even though most changes do not correlate with conflict. Second, the identified issues (what congregations say they fight about) are less significant than underlying structural and systemic issues. Third, the ability to effectively introduce and manage change – in ways consistent with the congregation's own tradition – is a critical skill set for leaders who desire thriving congregations.<sup>57</sup>

What Brubaker's research points to is that it is the poor way in which change is handled and introduced that mostly accounts for the change leading to conflict, rather than the change itself, and that only a few types of change are inherently more likely to lead to conflict.

### **The church in God's purposes for the world**

Having reviewed much of the available research on congregational conflict, I want to draw towards a close by briefly exploring my conviction that the church is significant in God's purposes for the world, and that how the church conducts itself is an important feature of its existence.<sup>58</sup> Along with Robert Warren, I am convinced that, "the church needs to pay close attention to how it is the church," because "the work of spreading the faith is intimately bound up with how the church functions."<sup>59</sup> Warren notes that the apostle Paul puts a great deal of emphasis on relationships within the church and relatively little on "preaching the gospel," indicating that Paul sees the gospel being preached through the way that the church lives its common life.<sup>60</sup> Such a view sees the church as God's "primary agent of mission" and "not simply as somewhere to which to take the person seeking after faith, but as the supreme means by which God has established that the gospel should be demonstrated in human life and human community."<sup>61</sup> This represents a high view of the church, and a challenging one for the church in our contemporary society. It emphasises the importance of the church's corporate life, as John Howard Yoder also reminds us: "It is the business of the church to change the world, not only by changing individuals but also by being a different kind of human community in the midst of the world."<sup>62</sup> Further, it offers a specific challenge for how we handle conflict in our relationships and functioning within the church, as Robert Warren most helpfully spells out:

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<sup>56</sup> Brubaker, D. R. *op. cit.*,

<sup>57</sup> Brubaker, D. R. *op. cit.*,

<sup>58</sup> I have argued this more fully in an earlier essay. McKay, A. J. M. "How do you understand the relationship between the Church, the world and the kingdom of God, and how has this understanding influenced and shaped your ministry in your local community?" unpublished essay, February 2006, submitted for a module on Ministry in Contemporary Society towards a Doctorate of Ministry, Spurgeon's College, London

<sup>59</sup> Warren, R. *Being Human, Being Church: Spirituality and Mission in the Local Church* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995) 3, 12

<sup>60</sup> Warren, R. *op. cit.*, 14

<sup>61</sup> Warren, R. *op. cit.*, 14-15

<sup>62</sup> Yoder, J. H. "The Unique Role of the Historic Peace Churches" in *Brethren Life and Thought*, 14, (Summer, 1969), 136

Despite the forces at work which seem to have marginalised the church, we stand today faced with a great new opportunity to speak the good news of Christ into our culture by the way we live that truth in the life of the local church. ... there are hungers in our society that make the life of the church, at least potentially, of great significance. ... *There is a great hunger for relationships today. ... There is also a great hunger for demonstration today.* People want to see whether it works. The church is called to be the pilot project of the new humanity established by Christ, an outpost of the kingdom of God and the ‘community of the Age to Come’. Not least is the world looking for models of handling conflict. ... The danger here is that the church handles conflict by sweeping it under the carpet, often because the feeling is abroad that ‘Christians should not disagree’. A church where there is no conflict has little relevance to our society. A church that has found a way to handle conflict creatively will be good news to all around it and in it. ... [T]here is a longing to see ... the truth of God’s call to love being practised. Conflicts in the church can seem such a distraction from getting on with the real work; *but this is the real work*. When people come near such a community they will instinctively know how real the relationships are.<sup>63</sup>

This view of the missional nature of the church’s corporate relational witness is shared by others, including David Bosch, who affirms that “The church can be a credible sacrament of salvation for the world only when it displays to humanity a glimmer of God’s imminent reign – a kingdom of reconciliation, and peace and new life.”<sup>64</sup> At the same time it is important to ground this in a realistic view of the church’s limitations and sinfulness, as Nicholas Healey is at pains to stress for us:

As Christians, then, we have not only to fight against the power of sin in the fallen world, we must fight against it in the midst of our ecclesial body and within ourselves. This fact should be reckoned with in every ecclesiology as an unavoidable aspect of the church in its pilgrim state.<sup>65</sup>

Healey brings us back to our starting point where we recognised that the way conflict is handled in the church is often far from modelling something healthy and transformative, but instead often appears to be rooted in fear and avoidance.

## Conclusion

Let me draw to a close. In this essay I have sought to identify some of the ways in which conflict is currently handled in the church, drawing on the available literature, and I have proposed that there is a need to change the culture within the church, in order for conflict to be handled creatively and transformatively. The reason to effect such a change is so that the church can provide a more authentic and dynamic witness to the world of God’s loving purposes and the transformed community into which he calls all people.

Having reviewed some of the currently available research on church conflict, it is worth noting two features of this research. First, it is not extensive, and there is considerable scope for further research in this area. Second, most of the research that has been conducted has been carried out in the USA. Given the differences in context for the church in the UK, compared with the USA, there is therefore a need for research into church conflict that is conducted in a British context. However, church conflict is a broad field with many dimensions, as I have indicated elsewhere.<sup>66</sup> This suggests that, it will be important for such research to identify specific areas of church conflict for exploration, taking account of the time and resources available to the researcher(s).

<sup>63</sup> Warren, R. *op. cit.*, 15-18. His emphases.

<sup>64</sup> Bosch, D. J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 377

<sup>65</sup> Healy, N. M. *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 10

<sup>66</sup> McKay, A. J. M. *Resolving Conflict*, 2008: 194-210

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